

PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION EXPERIENCED BY
PARTICIPANTS OF MODERN WILDERNESS RITES OF PASSAGE QUESTS:
AN INTUITIVE INQUIRY

by

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A dissertation submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Psychology

Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

Palo Alto, California

March 7, 2010

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Abstract

Psycho-Spiritual Transformation Experienced by

Participants of Modern Wilderness Rites of Passage Quests:

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This study investigates and reports the quest experiences of modern wilderness rites of passage questers that prompted psycho-spiritual transformation, the nature of those psycho-spiritual transformations, and the context of questers' lives when called to quest. Intuitive Inquiry provided the method for the research that relied on the researcher's intuitive impressions of interviews with 12 questers who believed they experienced psycho-spiritual transformation as the result of a quest. The researcher identified 12 lenses through which he viewed the subject matter before engaging in the interviews. These lenses were strengthened, expanded, and changed and 3 new lenses emerged when the researcher analyzed the interview data, including his intuitive impressions of the interviews, using thematic content analysis. These final lenses included the concepts that (a) in Nature, all is interconnected and modern humans long for and find comfort in this connection; (b) humans possess potential to transform beyond their imaginings and are driven by powerful evolutionary or spiritual forces to do so; (c) the context of the events in questers' lives that precipitates their answering the call to quest influences any psycho-spiritual transformation that occurs as a consequence; (d) greater self-awareness can be achieved through archetypal encounters in Nature, through ritual, and through reflecting unconscious material onto Nature; and (e) integration of such greater self-awareness can promote psycho-spiritual transformation. The findings presented are that a modern wilderness rites of

passage quest serves as an accelerant to the psycho-spiritual transformational process of questers who earnestly undertake their own, likely unconscious, version of the archetypal, yearning-discovery-integration, hero's journey. Such transformation processes involve the integration of newly discovered aspects of themselves revealed as a result of connecting with Nature during the quest. Guides can utilize these findings to encourage questers to examine the longing in their lives for clues as to their unconsciously desired psycho-spiritual transformation.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all heroes and heroines
who quest to find themselves in Nature's wilderness.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Dr. Nancy Rowe, the chairperson of my dissertation committee, for the patient assistance she has provided me throughout the dissertation process. She has generously shared with me her connection with Nature and her understanding of academic rigor. Dr. Charles Fisher and Dr. John Davis, members of my dissertation committee, have graciously shared with me their insights and have consistently provided me with encouragement and inspiration. I thank them.

I am also grateful to Dr. William Braud who, as my advisor, inspired me to pursue the passion within me that resulted in this project. Dr. Rosemary Anderson provided support and guidance in my application of Intuitive Inquiry as the research method for my dissertation, for which I express my gratitude. All of the faculty and my fellow classmates, throughout the several years of my studies at ITP and Naropa, have influenced this work and I appreciate them all for that influence.

My editor, Dr. Karen Funk, displayed extraordinary skill in discovering my numerous attempts to misspell words, to violate APA writing style, and otherwise to distort written language. I thank her for her cheerful, patient, and speedy work.

I had the extreme good fortune to meet and interview 12 wonderful people for this study, all of whom openly and willingly shared with me some very sacred moments they had experienced in their lives. I was given the opportunity to glimpse the greatness of these individuals. I am humbled and awed by what I witnessed. To these people and for these privileges I am thankful.

Most importantly, I express my loving gratitude to my wife, Nora, who recently completed her own dissertation, for the support and understanding of a fellow traveler. Once again, she has lovingly and patiently endured the terrifying beauty of another of my psycho-spiritual journeys: this one launched by work on this dissertation.

Preface: Beauty of Terrifying Shapes

The Soul Lives Contented

The soul lives contented by listening,
if it wants to change
into the beauty of terrifying shapes,
it tries to speak.

That's why you will not sing,
afraid as you are
of who might join
with you.

The voice hesitant,
and her hand trembling in the dark for yours.
She touches your face
and says your name in the same instant.

The one you refused to say,
over and over,
the one you refused to say (Whyte, 1992, p. 31).

At the age of 28 I co-found an alternative energy company that uses renewable resources—such as hydro, wind, and cogeneration—to produce electricity. The company is successful, and it launches an initial public offering (IPO) 6 years later. Five years after the IPO, a public utility acquires a large block of the company's stock with plans to take over the company. It makes promises to the other stockholders who acquiesce in the take-over; however, when its nuclear power plant has to be shut down, it defaults on its promises to those shareholders. To cover the fact of its failure, the public utility attempts to divert blame to the founders of my company, my partners, and me. One of my business partners, a liberal Democrat, is serving as the first female mayor of conservative, patriarchal Salt Lake City. The local political powers, frustrated by my partner's popularity and effectiveness as mayor, jump on the accusation of the public utility against the founders of our company and deploy their sympathizers in the news media and local, state, and federal governments to destroy the mayor, along with the rest of us.

For five years, at the expense of millions of dollars, the mayor, my other partners, and I fight the relentless legal pressures of these political enemies and the forces of the government they conscript to their ruthless cause. In the end, on the verge of financial ruin, I put the welfare of my family above my need for justice. I find something to which I can plead guilty to satisfy the hungry beast that had been unleashed on us and to end the battle I will lose even if I prevail in court. I plead guilty to allowing the attorneys for the company to alter my description of a transaction from a “fee” to an “option” in a draft of the offering memorandum for the company’s IPO. The document that provided for the fee bears the label of “option” and the attorneys advised that the document label would be a more accurate descriptor than the word “fee.” The offering memorandum accurately detailed the amount of the payment, the payees, the payer, the purpose, and all other aspects of the transaction. While I am certain no one was misled by the use of one word versus the other, I did, in fact, follow the attorneys’ advice and allowed the word to be changed. So I plead to this “crime.”

Federal District Judge Dee Benson is forced to mete out the punishment for this injustice, and, apparently not content with it; he says, in sentencing me:

I don’t generally start off a sentence with a compliment, Mr. Wood, but I will in your case. Your attitude and demeanor and cooperation . . . [have] been remarkable and quite admirable. . . . [Your company] in terms of its near collapse and its problems both civilly and criminally has been overstated in the press. . . . I certainly don’t put you in the [criminal] category. . . . [But] . . . you’re in that unfortunate situation of being the person who goes to jail because the public good needs to be satisfied. (U.S. District Court, 1996, pp. 18-22)

He sentences me to a year and a day, which provides further evidence of his displeasure with the prosecutors and the injustice of the case. One year is the minimum sentence to which he can sentence me under the federal minimum sentencing guidelines. If sentenced to a year, I would have to serve a year; however, any sentence over a year is eligible for a “good time” deduction.

In other words, the effect of increasing the minimum sentence by one day is to reduce the actual time I will have to serve by several weeks. Moreover, in an unprecedented and unexpected action, Judge Benson, after I serve a little more than half of my sentence, orders Nellis FPC to move me to a halfway house, near my home in Salt Lake City.

So deeply do I slumber in the captivity of my daily existence that a screaming wake-up call of such unjust decibels is required to awaken me. I wonder at the power of my soul to bring into my reality events of a magnitude so enormous. I am very grateful for the compassionate amelioration of the situation; although he is caught in the cogs of the machine set in motion by mal-intended politicians, Judge Benson uses his power to lessen the blow they deal me. I also wonder, without self-incrimination, at the gentleness of previous messages from my soul that I miss. Only when those first symbolic imprisonments escape my understanding does my soul augment the severity of the symbols until, in desperation, it changes into a beautiful terrifying shape I eventually come to understand.

Even with the clamoring of the alarm clock of impending actual imprisonment, I do not immediately awaken; further rattling is required. I was born into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, as was almost all of the population of the small town in which I grew up. In addition to serving a mission, I was active in the lay ministry of the church. At the time my soul attempts to awaken me, I am serving on the High Council of my local area. However, when the local newspapers begin their campaign of destruction against my partners and me, the church—instead of offering refuge to my wife, my six children, and me—decides to hold a court of excommunication. The church court finds that I have committed no moral or legal crimes, publishes its findings, and recommends no punishment; nevertheless, a much harsher judgment is

reflected in the opinions of our fellow church members. My family and I endure the ostracism of church members, neighbors, and many of our “friends.”

The beauty of these terrifying shapes lies in how they illustrate the dimensions of the prisons I create for my freedom-loving soul. I lived the American dream; I grew up as a religious boy on a farm, and, through education, hard work, and good fortune, I cofounded a company, grew it, and became economically successful. Now malevolent politicians use the awesome powers of the same America that enabled my dream to destroy it. Furthermore, the religious organization of my youth and young adulthood, to which I have given years of service, delights in the downfall of one of their own, rather than providing support and comfort. I wonder what else I hold onto as foundational that possesses no more substance than these shadows on the walls of the cave.

When I question the stability of the foundations of country and religion upon which I construct my life and the prison for my soul, I lapse into depression and recurring nightmares of imprisonment. At one point, I seek the help of a psychologist who diagnoses me with PTSD. The diagnosis horrifies me. At the time, I know little of psychology and I think that the label means I suffer from a disease. I feel that I possess insufficient fortitude to weather the challenges of my life and have blow them so out of proportion that I cause myself to become psychologically damaged.

One day, in the midst of the legal battles swirling in our lives, my ever-loyal wife returns from a massage appointment carrying an Animus Valley Institute brochure for what it called a “vision quest.” Sitting at our kitchen counter, I thumb the brochure as we talk. The brochure provides a description of a vision quest: several days in the wilderness, three of which are spent alone and fasting, seeking a life purpose and a gift to bring back to the world. I experience a flood of memories of moments I have felt connected in the wilderness: I recall that I have spent hours alone in the fields of our farm, have fished in the mountains near my home, have spent many days

and nights camping and hiking in the wilderness, and have often driven deep into the vast wilderness that surrounds my home to pray. My soul speaks; it whispers that I should do the vision quest described in the brochure. Because the message has at that point “changed into the beauty of terrifying shapes” I am finally ready to hear it. I hear my soul. I look up from the brochure into the blue Scottish eyes of the person I have loved since we were high school sweethearts and say, “I have to do this.”

Never before or since in my life have I been so certain that I must do something as I am in that instant when I decide to go on the vision quest. In the midst of the chaos my soul has created in that life, I experience unprecedented clarity and an otherworldly sense of purpose. Many times before and during my wilderness rites of passage quest, I wonder whether I am doing the right thing, but I remember the clarity I had in that moment when I had decided to do it, and I persevere.

I travel to Durango, Colorado in September of 1994 to meet at the designated place to begin our wilderness rites of passage quest. I arrive a day early, walk around the town, and spend a restless night in a hotel near the meeting place. Many times I think of just returning to my home and forgetting the whole crazy idea, but the clarity of my call pushes me on. When our group gathers, I think they represent a very strange collection. The ceremonies, which seem very pagan and even sacrilegious, leave me ill at ease. At times I feel so uncomfortable that I choose not to participate. I imagine God would be mad at me for participating. Even when we perform a sweat lodge ceremony, my only goal is survival; although I succeed in attaining that goal, I essentially miss the opportunity for insight that the sacred ceremony might provide. In retrospect I see that, so ensconced in my prison am I, that, even when the barred door swings open, I cower in the corner.

After 3 days in Durango, we travel to Canyonlands National Park. Because of my affinity with the outdoors, I immediately begin to feel more relaxed and comfortable when we begin the

challenging hike down into the canyon. We spend about 3 days performing more ceremony and finding our “power spots.” Although I feel more relaxed generally, I only reluctantly and minimally participate in the sacred dance ceremony. Other ceremonies, such as the fire ceremony wherein one places some symbol of what one wants to leave behind one in the fire, makes more sense to me. I burn a copy of my company’s IPO memorandum.

The night before those of us performing our wilderness rites of passage are to leave the group and walk to our separate power spots where we will spend 3 days and 3 nights alone, we gather to talk of our fears. Many of the others express fears of the scorpions, bears, snakes, and other creatures. I do not share their fears; I have spent many nights camping (although never alone) in the wilderness. However, my soul quickly corrects that arrogance: during the 1st night of the solo, a black bear walks through my camp a few feet from where I rest under my tarp. My heart pounds so loudly I think I can hear it echoing off the canyon walls. The bear pays no attention to me whatsoever and continues down the slope. She has accomplished my soul’s purpose: I am now terrified. Again, upon reflection, it is clear to me that the bear is not the real cause of my fear; something significant is about to change. I can feel it, and I fear it.

When I have been participating in my rites of passage quest in the wilderness for about a week, the last 3 days of it spent fasting, completely alone and terrified that Bear would return, I dream of imprisonment, engage in a conversation with a tree firmly rooted in a cliff, and see faces of historical freedom fighters in the rocks. Because I am alone in outer wild nature, my soul, my inner wild nature, feels at home and very alive (Abram, 1996, p. 16-21). Because fasting and fear have quieted the din of my ego-chatter, I hear my soul. A few days later I record the following words that relate my felt experience of the final night of the 3-day solo portion of my wilderness rites of passage quest:

In the desert, on the shelf of a rock cliff deep in a canyon of Canyonlands in Southeastern Utah on a cool, crystal clear autumn night, I sit in my power circle. I am well into my 4th day of fasting, seeking a gift to bring back to my people. I sit as still as I can. A slight wind rustles the scarce vegetation. Against the backdrop of a hundred-foot high red cliff marbled with granite, a great, weather-battered piñon pine tree, my guide for this part of my journey, and I gaze across the canyon. The night has crept into the canyon several hours before, stretching the shadows until they have melded into darkness. My eyes gradually acclimate to the darkness; the sky is clear, and the now familiar lights that have traveled for many rotations of the Earth parade across the sky in witness of yet one more rotation. For 3 days and now a 3rd night, I have meditated here, searching for answers among the rocks across the canyon. I have seen the faces of the Buddha, Churchill, Mohammed, Abraham Lincoln, Karl Marx, and Martin Luther King. Because of my Mormon upbringing, I have sought the face of Christ.

In this spot, I have listened for hours to the old piñon pine tree. Before setting out to find my power place, I had dreamed of it: a sheer rock cliff, with a lone pine tree. When I had encountered this spot after searching for hours in the canyons, I had known it was the power place of my dream. The tree has obviously suffered years of abuse by very harsh weather. It is bent, all alone and abandoned; no other trees are around to buffer the blasting winds. It wears several broken branches and has driven its roots into what appears to be solid rock. It tells me that it has learned from the adversity, is a tougher and wiser tree for the experiences. I reflect on my own adversities. I seem to be reeling still from the blows. I sometimes feel as though I am living someone else's life. Maybe I have been, and that is why my soul has brought me here. As I sit in my spot, I feel the value of this tree's lessons but I cannot rationalize it. (As it later turns out, the tree's lessons are of enormous literal value to me: I become stronger, my relationship

with my wife strengthens, and my family becomes stronger because we are buffeted by a great storm of life. We lean into it, hold onto each other, and emerge strengthened.)

I try to think of none of the adversity as I sit in the power circle. I try to keep my mind clear. Everything seems amazingly clear after 4 days of fasting. It had taken most of the 4 days to quiet my ego. The constant conversation usually going on in my head has finally stopped, and I just listen. What gift can I take home to my people?

How is it that a religious Mormon has ventured so far from his normal mode of seeking inspiration? Mormons are taught that fasting and prayer is an acceptable, even a recommended, method of obtaining inspiration. In that regard, I am not very far afield. However, very few Mormons would create a power circle by opening sacred space and honoring each of the four directions with a blessed rock. I am not yet free of my religious chains, and I worry that God will not be happy with me for dabbling in these pagan rituals.

I finally find the face of Christ in the marbled rock of the cliff behind me, not in front of me where I have been seeking it. Surely, there is a message of value in the fact that I have been sitting with my back to the cliff by a great lone pine tree seeking something that was all the time just a few feet behind and above me. Finding that face smiling benevolently at me amid the other faces provides some relief and comfort to me. Maybe God is not as unhappy with me as I had begun to think. But why is His face behind when all of the other faces are in front of me?

I feel now, more than think, as I sit in my power circle. I don't have thoughts racing through my mind; it is very quiet in my mind. Deep inside my body, perhaps in my heart, I sense. I sense an overwhelming love. I feel both loved and loving. Love, given and received, accompanies images of my wife. This deep, resounding sense of love accompanies images of my children, of my extended family, of my business associates, of my friends, of everyone I know, of

everyone, of everything. Then in my mind comes the query, “What gift can I take back to my people?”

The birds in the canyons know the sun is coming before I see any evidence of it. They spread the word that their friends to the east have spotted a great ball of fire that is heading this way. Have they forgotten that the same thing occurred yesterday and the day before that? Why is my mind wandering again? My ego keeps working; it is so weak and so tired.

Tonight has provided me with one of the most spiritual experiences of my life; but I am also supposed to get a gift to bring back to my people. If I have received it, I don't know that I have received it—if I haven't received it, I am running out of time. I need to meet up with Ben, my solo “buddy,” at dawn and join at base camp with the others all returning from their 3-day solos. Quiet, mind! Concentrate, but don't think; hold the query: “What gift can I take back to my people?”

The pre-dawn light of the rising sun amplifies the contrast of the green trees against the red rocks as I peer down the canyon from my place in my power circle. Either I am not going to get a message to take back to my people or it has already come and I have missed it completely. I have had lots of good experiences on my wilderness rites of passage quest. After all, I encountered Bear and she has let me live to tell of it. Just because the culminating event of receiving a message did not happen, that cannot mean that I have failed in my quest. I am so exhausted and weak. I start to think about the work involved in dismantling my tarp, rolling up my sleeping bag, stuffing them all in my backpack, putting on my hiking boots, and humping down the canyon and along the 3 miles back to base camp. Okay, time to get going; no message is coming.

The sun clears the top of the canyon, which has a thousand different faces during the course of a day as the sun plays with the shadows. I have seen this face of dawn for 4 mornings now. I think, "This place is a part of me and I am a part of it, we are linked forever." I am not concerned about getting a message for my people now; maybe the face of Christ is my message. I certainly have learned how much Nora, my wife, means to me, how much I love her, and how much she has given me. My work, religious duties, and impatience have impeded my attentions to her. I commit to demonstrating to her how much I love her.

I look around my power circle with genuine gratitude. The night has taught me its lessons. I begin to rise. The cold of the night has made my joints very stiff; I have been kneeling for nearly 8 hours. The pain associated with fasting has ceased at some time during the 2nd day, but I feel light-headed and very weak. The world appears very sharp and clear. The air is perfectly still; I can hear lizards skittering across the rocks on the cliff behind me. Then I hear: "Set your people free" (Wood, 2004, pp. 11-15).

At times tears flow when I think of the extraordinary effort my soul undertakes to convey this message of freedom to me. First, it speaks in symbols, which is the language souls use in dreams, active imagination, and altered states of consciousness to communicate to consciousness. The piñon pine, Great Tree, which gives me its name for a time as my Earth name, is certainly free and strong in its world; the faces I see in the rocks are those of great men who have fought for the freedom of others; a wild and free (and my favorite) quote of Jesus, whose face is in the cliff behind me, is, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). I fail to recognize the message in these symbols. I can just imagine the frustration of my soul as I sit in my power circle wondering what message I am to take back to

my people. Finally, it has to pull out a sledgehammer and resort to English language, “Set your people free.”

As I understand this message, its implementation requires major changes in my life, the lives of my family, and the lives of those whom I originally defined as “my people.” I make major changes in my life: together with my wife, I leave the Mormon Church and give my children the freedom to do so (they all leave); I move to Eugene, Oregon; and I change my occupation to become a college professor. Some changes are freeing for my people and me, such as leaving the Mormon faith; others end up as just thrashing about. I return to Salt Lake City. I need to be free in my place; Utah is my place and it is my wife’s place. I love teaching and interacting with searching human beings; however, I do not love my subjects of economics and corporate finance (or at least I do not love the way I am required to teach them). Hence, I return to my financial consulting business and am seeking a degree in transpersonal psychology so that I can return to teaching and love what I am teaching.

The message I receive during my wilderness rites of passage quest continues profoundly to shift the way I am in the world: my soul whispering there just beneath the surface, reminding me, as Mary Oliver (1992) does, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life” (p. 94). I passionately seek an understanding about the source of that soulful resonance. So far, my search has included years of studying shamanism, Buddhism, and transpersonal psychology. I search for the mystical “other” that spoke to me and told me to set my people free. I reenact other wilderness rites of passage, train to become a wilderness rites of passage guide, and guide others on their wilderness rites of passage journeys. Finally, I conduct this Intuitive Inquiry study. While the study involves 12 participants who generously share their time, experiences, and hearts with me, in the end, this study is about my own self-discovery.

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